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Women's rights groups urge government to hold inquiry into Sharia courts for lack of access to justice

Women's rights groups urge government to hold inquiry into Sharia 'courts' and the lack of access to justice

Southallblacksisters.org.uk (09.12.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1Z9wOnX> - On Thursday 10 December 2015, Southall Black Sisters (SBS), One Law for All, Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation (IKWRO), Centre for Secular Space and British Muslims for Secular Democracy will attend 10 Downing Street to hand deliver a letter signed by nearly 400 individuals and organisations urging David Cameron to hold an inquiry into the discriminatory nature of Sharia 'courts' and other religious arbitration forums.

These women's and human rights organisations also led successful campaigns preventing public authorities such as the governing body of UK Universities (UUK) and the Law Society from incorporating aspects of Sharia laws into their public policies. With regards the question of parallel legal systems, they argue that in these times of draconian austerity measures and cuts to legal aid, these unaccountable, arbitrary and religious 'courts' presided over by fundamentalist religious forces are increasingly filling the vacuum that is created. They dispense a second rate system of justice that deny vulnerable women and children access to equality and human rights.

Campaigners are calling on the government to exclude Sharia and all other religious forums, including the Jewish Beth Din from presiding over divorce and family matters; to reinstate legal aid; to stop the repeal of the Human Rights Act and to re-affirm the principle of the separation of religion and the law. The law is a key component of securing justice for citizens and one law for all.

Pragna Patel of SBS says:

"Discriminatory religious codes are very much a part and parcel of the continuum of domestic and gender based violence and other abuses that BME women face in their daily lives since they reinforce discrimination, deny exit and prevent women from accessing justice or from asserting their right to equality...For these reasons and more, parallel legal systems must not be allowed to exist."

Maryam Namazie of One Law for All says:

"Dismantling religious courts isn't a denial of people's right to religion, it's a defence of human rights, and particularly women's rights vis-a-vis the religious-Rightwing and their attempts at restricting women's rights in the family. By allowing religious courts to operate, we are saying that Muslim or Jewish women do not have the same rights as others in this country. This is unacceptable."

Gita Sahgal of Centre for Secular Space says:

"Sharia Councils drag women into living out a fundamentalist vision of Islam. They do this by promoting 'Islamic law' as higher than the law of the land and by marketing divorce as a solution for a problem they have created. It is a disgrace that they are tolerated by the authorities and allowed to become charities. All parallel legal systems are discriminatory and undermine women's rights under the law. It is time that they are dealt with."

Diana Nammi of IKRWO says:

"The whole premise of religious 'courts' is discrimination to women, they represent a major barrier to women's rights and not only do they deny women justice, they also distance women from the mainstream court system and safety measures, such as civil protection orders, which can have dire consequences. Given that religious 'courts' are community based and often mediate, there are dangerous implications including locking women within violent marriages and "honour" based violence. The government must prioritise women's safety by ensuring access to mainstream justice and preventing the proliferation and deepening entrenchment of these parallel legal systems."

Nasreen Rehman of British Muslims for Secular Democracy says:

"Government, Parliament and the courts have a duty to protect the rights and prevent the exploitation of the most vulnerable members of society. But all too often we find they abrogate this responsibility by condoning parallel systems of justice that promote cruel and discriminatory practices perpetuated by obscurantists and fanatics in many faith communities – often, falsely pleading divine sanction as a smokescreen for cruelty. The only way to ensure equality and justice is to stand together for clarity and 'one law for all.' This does not mean that we do not accept religious, cultural and ethnic diversity; rather we raise our voices against injustices perpetuated in the guise of faith and culture."

Read more: <http://bit.ly/1jZEtFw> and <http://bit.ly/1IRvz8F>

UK Pakistani Christian convert attacked and hospitalised for his faith



Nissar Hussain, a Christian convert from Islam, hospitalised due to intolerant Muslim neighbours who refuse to allow him to live his life as a Christian.

British Pakistani Christian Association (18.11.2015) – <http://bit.ly/1PCIY7L> - Nissar Hussain and his family have, to date, faced around 15 years of almost relentless persecution. This has taken many forms including: an arson attack which forced them to relocate; intimidation; a mob gathering outside their house; false accusations against Nissar; threats to the women; assaults; verbal abuse; stones through their living room windows; and countless cars destroyed.

Such a campaign of violence and intimidation would naturally lead one to speculate if this family were perhaps particularly antisocial neighbours or leading lives of crime. What could possibly provoke such prolonged local hatred and intolerance? They are Pakistani Christian converts.

Nissar and his wife Kubra decided to follow Christ in 1996, and have brought each of their five children up as Christians. Although they knew that they would face fierce opposition from their Pakistani Muslim families if they converted, they could not imagine how hard life would become for them in their local neighbourhood simply for changing their faith. Alarmingly, this family do not live in Pakistan, where sadly such religious intolerance is common, but here in the UK.

The BPCA recently reported on the Hussain family's case and we continue our appeal for funds to enable them to move out of the area and escape further persecution. Regrettably since our report matters have escalated and Nissar has been attacked.

Yesterday evening (Tuesday 17th November) at 5pm, Nissar Hussain left home to drive his car to the local police station, where he has had to park these past few months due to several cars being smashed when parked near his home.

Before he even managed to reach the car door, two hooded men stepped out of a parked car, a third man remaining at the wheel.

As soon as they spotted Nissar they attacked him from behind beating him with a cricket bat, kicking and punching him until they were spotted by a passerby who, upon seeing Nissar sprawled on the ground, ran after the two attackers who promptly jumped into a moving vehicle and sped off.

As a result of this unprovoked assault Nissar has been left with a fractured kneecap; a fractured left hand; and extensive bruising all over his body. Due to the severity of these injuries to his knee and hand he has had to undergo surgery.

This attack is the latest in a long history of events in the ongoing persecution of Nissar by his neighbours who have been determined to drive him and his family out of their home. The traumatised family are in a constant state of anxiety, face verbal abuse, or worse, every time they step outside and consequently feel like prisoners in their own home.

For more information and pictures:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3258159/Asian-family-converted-Christianity-driven-home-Muslim-persecutors.html>

<http://metro.co.uk/2015/10/03/muslim-family-driven-from-their-home-after-converting-to-christianity-5419212/>

HRWF Footnote

If you are a victim of hostility or persecution because of your conversion to another religion in a country of the European Union, share your experience with us by sending an email to international.secretariat.brussels@hrwf.net.

The Commonwealth initiative for the freedom of religion or belief

Freedom Declared (28.09.2015) - <https://freedomdeclared.org/news/the-commonwealth-initiative-for-the-freedom-of-religion-or-belief/> - The Edward Cadbury Centre for the Public Understanding of Religion, University of Birmingham, has announced the establishment of the Commonwealth Initiative for the Freedom of Religion or Belief (CIFORB) with effect from 1 October 2015.

The Initiative has been funded by a generous contribution from the Templeton World Charitable Foundation and will establish a team of researchers and other professional staff based in Birmingham and in Westminster to support Commonwealth parliamentarians in their advocacy of freedom of religion or belief (FORB) and

interventions in the area. Enshrined most prominently in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, FORB is a central principle of international law:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

CIFORB's work will benefit citizens across the Commonwealth and beyond by modelling, supporting and developing effective advocacy strategies for parliamentarians to use to advance religious freedom globally. It will have lasting and enduring impact in the attainment of a fairer, safer global society where FORB is rightly cherished, and this will be a fitting tribute to the legacy of Sir John Templeton and his commitment to building a more peaceable and tolerant world.

Among other activities, the CIFORB team will:

- Create, collate and disseminate internationally-excellent research on FORB and strategies for upholding and extending this freedom. CIFORB's research will seek to understand the many different international perspectives on this issue, identify good practice and enable parliamentarians to act as effective advocates for those (particularly religious and non-religious minorities) whose freedom has been compromised;
- Host training events for parliamentarians, their senior advisors and emerging young leaders with an interest in human rights, religious affairs and foreign affairs on the significance of FORB and strategic approaches to FORB advocacy.
- Establish a high-level Commonwealth Commission which will work in strategically-significant nations to support and encourage parliamentary activity and help parliamentarians to maximise their opportunities to speak out authoritatively.

The team will be led by Baroness Berridge in Westminster, who will join the University of Birmingham's staff, and Dr Andrew Davies in Birmingham. Professor Francis Davis (Birmingham) and Professor Monica Duffy Toft (Oxford) are the Initiative's senior advisors and the project team are supported by an internationally-eminent advisory board, chaired by Professor Malcolm Evans (Bristol) and comprising UK and Commonwealth parliamentarians, academics and community leaders.

Scrapping religion classes from schools 'the right thing to do', says Victorian education minister

The Guardian (21.08.2015) - <http://www.wwrn.org/articles/44890/> - Religious instruction will be scrapped from the curriculum of Victorian schools from next year and replaced with education about building respectful relationships, the government announced on Friday.

The new relationships education program will be taught by qualified teachers and aims to help children understand global cultures and traditions, recognise and prevent family violence, and appreciate and understand diversity.

Special religious instruction, currently taught during school hours by volunteers, will be moved out of regular class times, freeing 30 minutes a week for the new program.

The education minister, James Merlino, said about 20% of primary school students took part in religious instruction, while the remaining students occupied themselves with other activities, such as reading.

"You can't have 20% of school kids undertaking special religious education, while the other children are not getting teaching or learning, during precious curriculum time," he told ABC radio on Friday morning.

"I understand that some people are going to be upset by this decision, but it's the right thing to do."

Understanding others, including other world views and religions, and acting with tolerance and respect, were essential skills for young people to learn, he said.

Rob Ward, a spokesman for the main provider of special religious instruction in Victoria, Access Ministries, said his organisation had not been consulted by the government, and he was disappointed by the decision.

"It's hastily made and poorly advised," he told Guardian Australia. "Nobody has seen this new curriculum as yet, and I'm not sure how a primary school teacher will teach well and capably the basic beliefs of the five major religions."

Fairness for Religions in Schools, an organisation developed in response to religious instruction programs in Victoria and New South Wales, said the move was overdue.

Its chief executive, Lara Wood, said the organisation received feedback from parents concerned about religious instruction nearly every day.

"These parents are angry that their kids are losing four days' worth of school time each year for a very small minority of students," Wood said.

"Kids who do take part in the program are being told they will go to hell if they don't believe in God, and we had a report of one child last year being locked in a closet while taking part in religious education.

"Merlino is so courageous in making this decision, because there will be a backlash from a small section of the religious right, but he's done the perfect thing."

The minister for the prevention of family violence, Fiona Richardson, said addressing gender inequality would comprise an important aspect of the healthy relationships curriculum. Such education was key to preventing family violence, she said.

"We're including it in the curriculum so that every Victorian school teaches students these important skills and lessons."

Schools will receive training and guidance to deliver the new curriculum content, and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority will develop resources to support teachers. It will be implemented from the start of the 2016 school year.

Schools told to end religious instruction and teach morality instead

The Independent (15.06.2015)
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/schools-told-to-end-religious-instruction-and-teach-morality-instead-10319326.html> - Religious instruction

should be banned from schools and be the preserve of Sunday schools, madrassas or the home, according to proposals by the former Education Secretary Charles Clarke for a radical overhaul of religious education and the way faith schools operate.

Legislation compelling schools to hold a daily act of "predominantly Christian" worship in assemblies should also be scrapped, the Labour former frontbencher argues in a report jointly compiled with the religious education expert Professor Linda Woodhead, from Lancaster University.

In recommendations that will be studied keenly by faith and schooling experts, they argue that the emphasis should shift away from merely religious education, with pupils being taught religious and moral education instead.

However, the report stops short of urging faith schools to abandon the controversial practice of giving preference in admissions to children of a certain religion – arguing that children of families who regularly worship in a local church should have an enhanced right to attend its faith school.

Mr Clarke, who also served as Home Secretary, and Professor Woodhead conclude: "We do not believe that abolition of faith schools is either desirable or feasible, but we think that reforms could be beneficial and properly explored."

The Coalition published plans for reforming religious education before the general election, outlining that at least two faiths should be studied by pupils at GCSE and including greater provision for ethics and philosophy – as long as it was in the context of religion.

But in a foreword to the new report, the authors state that a more fundamental overhaul of the way religion is approached in schools is overdue, with current legislation in the main dating back to the Education Act 1944.

Mr Clarke and Professor Woodhead write that they "do not agree with those who urge that religion should somehow be excluded from school life and should therefore play little or no role in the state education system." However, they argue that religious instruction should not take place in schools because "it allows little or no time for questioning or criticism by pupils and/or ignores (or even distorts or caricatures) other forms of religion and belief and grants them no legitimacy".

Attempts to change or strengthen the current commitment to an act of daily worship – which previous research has shown as many as two-thirds of schools ignore or are unable to meet – would be fraught with legal difficulties, their pamphlet says.

"On balance we favour removing the requirement altogether and so repealing those parts of legislation which require schools to provide daily acts of worship," they say.

But the pair maintain that it is important for governors to continue to provide for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of today's pupils – possibly through a broader approach to assemblies. The education standards watchdog, Ofsted, should monitor whether schools are fulfilling this commitment without recourse to legislation.

"All pupils in attendance at a maintained school shall on each school day take part in a period of reflection" aimed at encouraging "spiritual, moral and cultural development", they add, arguing: "We believe the removal of the element of obligation combined with the approach described will rejuvenate assemblies rather than the opposite."

The move away from a "predominantly Christian" act of collective worship is essential in the wake of "the broadening of Britain's religious and cultural identity," they say.

British Muslim women 71% more likely to be unemployed due to workplace discrimination

The Independent (15.04.2015) - Discrimination against Muslim women in the workplace means they are much more likely to be unemployed than white Christian women - even when they have the same qualifications and language skills - research shows.

British Muslim women are around 70 per cent more likely to be looking unsuccessfully for work, according to the University of Bristol's Dr Nabil Khattab, who spoke at the British Sociological Association's annual conference in Glasgow.

The recent national Labour Force survey showed the unemployment rate among Muslim women was 18 per cent, compared with 9 per cent for Hindu women and 4 per cent for white Christian women. This has previously been attributed to Muslim women being less well educated and less fluent in English, but Dr Khattab says his data shows the discrepancy is also likely to be explained by employer discrimination.

Dr Khattab analysed a sample of 2,643 from the national Labour Force survey to compare the rates of those looking for work without success. He adjusted the sample in order to compare women with similar educational level and language abilities and controlled for marital status, children and strength of religious belief.

He found that Muslim women were 71 per cent more likely than white Christian women to be unemployed, even when they had the same educational level and language skills. Hindu women were 57 per cent more likely to be unemployed than white Christian women.

"Economic activity among Muslim women in the UK remains considerably lower and their unemployment rate remains significantly higher than the majority group even after controlling for qualifications and other individual characteristics," Dr Khattab said.

He added that the conspicuousness of Muslim women's religious background was likely to be a key factor in explaining their exclusion. "They wear the hijab or other religious symbols which makes them more visible and as such exposed to greater discrimination."

This UK antisemitism survey would have shocked my great uncle Alex

The Guardian (14.01.2015)

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/14/uk-antisemitism-survey-holocaust-france-jewish-britain> - He survived the Holocaust and never trusted France -

but he always thought Jewish people could feel at home in Britain

On 20 September 1943, my great uncle Alex found for the first and last time in his life that the smarts for which he would always be renowned in his family were no longer enough: he was arrested in Nice and sent to the death camps.

Alex knew what awaited him there; his older brother Jakob had done this journey already and died in Auschwitz a year before. So he dug up the floorboards of the train with his stubby fingers, slipped through the hole, lay on the track while the train rattled over him and walked back to Paris, hidden along the way by communists. He then joined the [Resistance](#), but he never trusted France again. In later life, he gave back the Légion d'Honneur he was awarded for his war service after Charles de Gaulle described Jews in 1967 as "[elite, domineering and sure of themselves](#)".

Are you tired of Holocaust stories? Apologies for bringing up all that "unpleasantness" again, but I've been thinking about Alex this week. According to a [YouGov poll](#), 45% of Britons agreed with at least one antisemitic statement put to them, such as "Jews chase money more than other people" (endorsed by a whopping 25%), and "Jews' loyalty to Israel makes them less loyal to Britain than other Britons" (20%).

I feel less certain about another survey this week, by the [Campaign Against Antisemitism](#), conducted on social media, which claimed that 54% of British Jews feel they have no future in the UK. But the tenacity of antisemitic beliefs is striking even in Britain, where, according to a [separate report](#) last year by Jewish Policy Research, 47% of the British Jewish respondents felt antisemitism was not a very big problem (although 40% did feel antisemitism had increased in the past five years).

This would have astonished Alex. He adored Britain – he had been in Britain as part of the [Free French](#) before he was captured, and he often spoke about the comfort he got listening to the BBC World Service during his fighting days. I imagine it will astonish most Britons too, even those who, in a dark and unacknowledged place inside, instinctively agree with the statements posed by YouGov. You don't have to travel too far to find them in the UK. In fact, you can just turn on the BBC.

One Jewish woman, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, told BBC reporter Tim Wilcox this week that the horrific murder of four people in a kosher supermarket made her worry about the return of Jewish persecution. "Many critics, though, of Israel's policy would suggest that the Palestinians suffer hugely at Jewish hands as well," [Wilcox said](#) – all but saying: "So swings and roundabouts, really."

Wilcox later apologised on Twitter for a "poorly phrased" question, as though the problem here was one of grammar. Only two months previously this same reporter, in an on-air discussion about Miliband [losing Jewish support](#), said: "A lot of these prominent Jewish faces will be very much against the political mansion tax, presumably." They most certainly will! You know what those Jews are like – always watching their massive pile of shekels, with their prominent faces and their prominent noses.

Now we turn to Paris, where the terrible events of last week would not have surprised Alex nearly as much. There were an astonishing number of [attacks on Jews and synagogues](#) in France last year, with the result that twice as many Jews emigrated to Israel in 2014 than the year before.

Since the awful killings there has been plenty of talk from the media and politicians about how we all mustn't let this atrocity give rise to an anti-Muslim backlash. This is right and good. But can we take a few minutes to look at the lash itself, as well as dealing with the backlash? Four Jewish people were [killed because they were in a Jewish supermarket](#), yet this inconvenient truth has been relatively little remarked upon, certainly compared with

the angsting over the parameters of free speech at Charlie Hebdo, or commentary about the irony of the terrorists killing a fellow Muslim, the police officer Ahmed Merabet.

Is this because killing Jews is seen as par for the course when it comes to terrorist attacks? Because that does seem to be true. Going back to the attacks in Mumbai in 2008, the killers specifically sought out a Jewish community, Nariman House, and tortured and killed six Jews, including the Rabbi and his wife. The Taj Hotel has become the symbol of the Mumbai attacks but, [according to some reports](#), it was actually Nariman House that was the terrorists' main target. Already the killer of the Jewish people in the supermarket is being referred to, incorrectly, as "the Charlie Hebdo killer".

So just par for the course? Maybe, but I don't think that's quite what's happening here. Jews are, as the YouGov report made very clear, seen as a pretty dominant people: in charge of the media, you know. And Hollywood too. Elite, domineering and sure of themselves. So when they are attacked, there is a sense that – well, they kinda brought this on themselves, and there are other groups that are less elite that need more looking after.

I'm not sure why this is an either/or situation. A person can be horrified by anti-Muslim prejudice and also terrified by the attacks on Jews, and to talk about one is not an endorsement of the other. For a BBC reporter to balance the killing of Jews in Paris against the atrocities in Palestine is the definition of idiocy. Not as bad as expressing outright sympathy with the killer of the Jews, as the reliably idiotic "comedian" [Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala did on Facebook](#), but still bad. This is not the victim Olympics, with only one possible "winner". These were people who were killed, not political statements.

My great uncle Alex led a wonderful life after the war as an art dealer, but, as I said, he never again trusted the country that had betrayed him so badly. When I asked once why he refused to keep his paintings in a bank vault, preferring instead to keep them hidden in his house, he replied: "Because they always come for the Jews." Plus ça change.
